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ABSTRACT

At Norwalk Community College in Norwalk, Connecticut, a small group of faculty created three interdisciplinary courses with the belief that they would assist students in developing more finely honed critical thinking skills. One course is in the hard sciences, another in the social sciences, and another in the humanities. This paper discusses the ways in which the courses in the social sciences and the humanities encouraged students to cross disciplinary boundaries and examine contemporary issues from multiple perspectives. The humanities course included visual art, performance art, media arts, literature, music, and philosophy. The instructor established a theoretical grounding and then moved to practical experience by requiring students to do a creative project. The students also completed an experience paper, for which they were expected to view a work by a major artist. The social science course began by discussing the influences of the individual and society on one another. This course offered an overview of economic, philosophical, gender, class, race, and other issues in the chosen readings. The social science class began by presenting a theoretical basis for later class discussion of issues. It also examined the political, social, and economic roles of money in American society. Both courses asked students to pay attention, think, and consider real world consequences. (Author/NB)

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ED 471 539

Interdisciplinary Studies as Nexus: Crossing Discipline Borders into the World

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One of the best teachers I have ever had was my eighth grade teacher, Daniel Fuerst. During winter term, we recreated the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. It is now thought that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent, but because of their anarchist leanings and the anti-immigrant fears in 1920, they were convicted and put to death. During spring term, we ran a political campaign.

Mr. Fuerst divided the class so that everyone had a job. For the trial, some were journalists, some judges, some lawyers, some jury, some defendants. For the campaign, we had candidates, campaign managers, media, pollsters, and voters. My point is not to take you through my early education, but to note that the experiential, "real world" component of Mr. Fuerst's class has stuck with me all these years. I gained an understanding of both the election process and the judicial process, and learned a little about how to be a part of the world I was going to help to create. I also learned what the weaknesses in those systems were—Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted, inept but well-spoken candidates get elected over smart but less well-spoken ones, OJ went free. And by seeing the roles that other members of the class played, and discussing the results of our experiment, I got to see the impact of each role on the process. I got to see real world issues--and from multiple perspectives.

At Norwalk Community College in Norwalk, Connecticut, a small group of faculty created three interdisciplinary courses, believing that students needed to develop more finely honed critical thinking skills. One course is in the hard sciences—biology, chemistry and physics—one in the social sciences and one in the humanities. I'd like to discuss the ways in which the course in the humanities and the course in the social sciences force students to cross disciplinary borders to examine contemporary issues from multiple perspectives.

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COURSE DESCRIPTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

I'd like to begin by telling you a bit about what we intend in each course. The Humanities course defines art in its broadest sense to include visual arts, performance, media arts, literature, music and philosophy. We help students learn to identify and evaluate these arts, and ask them to see relationships and make connections among the various forms of creative expression. Students also explore their own creative processes.

The social science course focusses on four disciplines: political science, sociology, psychology and economics. The course deals with the nature of society, social change, and humankind's ability to adapt to social change, while discussing the forces that brought about the emergence and development of modern industrialized society. Once students have developed some historical and theoretical grounding, the social sciences are then used to deal analytically and conceptually with contemporary issues. I will discuss each course separately, beginning with the humanities course.

HUMANITIES: THE CREATIVE VOICE

Theoretical Background

We start with a grounding in theory. We discuss the creative process (preparation, incubation, illumination and implementation). We discuss subject (what is the poem/painting/song about?), content (what meaning does it convey?) and form (how is the work put together?). We discuss the artist's intent: what effect did the artist want this film or dance to have on his/her audience? How do we discover what that intent is? How important is it to know the artist's intent? We discuss the cultural contexts of an artwork. Most of us who teach the course are working with twentieth century pieces, and most students have some awareness of that century's major issues. And last, we discuss four broad categories of criticism: art for art's sake, art as a representation of the universe, art as teacher or entertainer, art as artist's vision.

Form is the most difficult aspect of this grounding. Many students are unfamiliar with any of the arts terminology, and they are so used to looking for meaning that looking strictly for form is difficult. We take them slowly through, for example, line, shape, color, texture, and space in the visual arts. We then analyze several paintings and photographs to see how artists have used these elements to create particular effects—effects which may or may not contribute to meaning.

Movement Outward from Theory

Once students have a theoretical base, we use many different techniques to move them from academic experience to practical experience.

First, we require them to do a creative project of their own. They must decide on an idea and an intent, find materials, pay attention to their own creative process, stay aware of the elements of form they are using, understand the context in which they are creating (their own life experience) and see the impact their work has on an audience when they present and discuss it in class.

So many students "gave up" creativity when they left fourth-grade band or art. Part of our goal with this project is to reawaken those joys of mucking around: making mud pies, finger paintings, or macaroni signs that are spray painted gold; playing the recorder; learning the electric slide or the polka. We also ask students to loosen the idea of creativity from the tentacles of "high" art or culture; that is, one does not need to be Picasso or Stravinsky to be creative. The project requires them to move from the comfort of abstractions to the reality of practice. One or two exceptional students have even combined media, doing dances with painting, or poetry and dance.

A second requirement of the course is that students do an Experience Paper. For this, they are expected to view an artwork live and in person in its natural habitat: the museum, the concert hall, the stage, the movie theatre. It must be a major artist's work (I must approve their

choices—no prints from over the sofa or paintings on black velvet or their little sister's ballet recital). The paper they write responds to this experience on several levels: the impact the other audience members had on the performance and the overall experience, the environment in which work was presented or performed, their expectations, an analysis of the form as best they can (works in time, such as music and dance are obviously much more difficult) and the influence their newly acquired knowledge of form had on their experience of the work. They are also asked to discuss the cultural context in which the work was presented and for which it was originally created. This last requirement usually means they have to do some research.

Students sometimes choose a work outside the five disciplines we've studied—theatre, for example—which requires them to draw from all the different forms we have reviewed in class. However, even when they choose an art form from our class discussions, this assignment provokes thinking about the interrelationships among the disciplines.

Some examples of what I mean: An experience of visual art is influenced by how it is lit (we study light in film); movies have a story (which connects to literature), scenery and sets (which connect to the visual arts), music, and sometimes dance. If there isn't dancing, movement, especially in action films, is carefully choreographed. Poetry is often enhanced with musical accompaniment when it is performed, and even when it is not, readings are filled with rhythm and the music of the language and the performer's voice. And so on.

A third way we attempt to bring students' experience into the practical is by introducing them to practicing artists. In an odd dichotomy, students seem often to believe that art is either really easy or really hard. They sometimes believe they can whip off a poem in fifteen minutes or they could *easily* have painted one of those white-on-white paintings. To try to disabuse them of these notions, one class during the semester, or a partial class, is set aside for anywhere between one and three artists to visit and discuss their work. The faculty at the college are willing to do this for each other, and we also sometimes speak about our own art to our own students. I have

used a poem of mine, titled "Witness," for this discussion. The poem takes place at the Metropolitan Museum here in New York on a late summer afternoon. It is a description of an experience I had while waiting for a friend of mine to arrive. A young man on roller blades approached me, claiming to be able to skate down the museum's steps backwards. He did—without injury! Newly divorced and overwhelmed, I wrote the poem to describe my sense of vulnerability as I stepped back into the world of relationships with men. I tell students about my history and about the afternoon, give students copies of several drafts of the poem, and discuss how I chose the words and arrangements that I did. Our intent, as teachers, is to make the serious making of art more accessible to them.

Realistic accessibility is a key element of the course: we want them to connect to the arts, feel they can be a part of the arts and understand the work involved in creation. In addition, we want them to have a voice, a way to express what they feel about an artwork. When we teach the elements of form, we spend a lot of time having students make things: make a mask using the elements of the visual arts; write and perform a musical piece with voices, rice in jars, keys, tapping pencils, bongo drums; write a poem with magnetic poetry kits; choreograph and perform a dance; map out a scene for a film. This allows them to get inside the material, and this is usually the point at which they start complaining that they can't look at or read anything anymore without analyzing it. They notice art and the elements of form everywhere: billboards, magazines, pop music, VH1, the furniture arrangement and colors in their living rooms; they say they can't go to a movie or listen to a song without analyzing it. They ask if this will go away. That's the moment I know they've made the leap!

Last, we spend time discussing whether or not modern society needs the arts. We discuss the NEA, public v. private funding, pornography v. art, the creative process as part of business, sciences, government. We discuss the critical theories and how they are applied to artworks. We discuss whether those theories can be used to exclude as well as include. We discuss

stereotypes: the ways in which women and ethnic and racial minorities are and have been portrayed in artworks and excluded from the art world. I bring them copies of Guerilla Girls posters. We talk about Serranno's Piss Christ. We talk about censorship and the distinction that's been made between craft and art and how that relates to women's issues. We talk about Ashcroft's draping of the statues in the Hall of Justice.

In making them part of the process of creation, in demystifying it and promoting the range of possibilities, in giving them a voice to talk about the connections between art and culture, in talking about the role of artists in society, we hope to help students to see the arts as a real and central part of a culture's life, rather than something—let's admit it—that can be cut in the next round of budget negotiations.

SOCIAL SCIENCE: THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Theoretical Background

In the social science course, we begin by defining "individual" and "society," and by discussing the influence of each on the other. Our culture is so adamantly individualistic that I try to get students to see that they are inextricably a part of many communities and that makes them responsible for what happens in those communities. Then, students are exposed to some background in each of the four disciplines. For example, we read selections from the following: Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Mill's *On Liberty* in political science, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* in economics; Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women* in psychology; Michael Harrington's *The Other America* in sociology.

Movement Outward from Theory

After students have a grasp of these basics, we begin to discuss issues: money, gender, class, race and ethnicity, globalization, technology. In these issue discussions, which weave themselves into the course in the theory section as well, students begin to see the complexity of issues and how each solution raises its own problems.

In addition, we use the theoretical contexts as a foundation for our discussion. We ask how, for example, Machiavelli, Marx, Smith, Freud, Miller and so on would approach the idea of money. We ask what the role of money is in American society. We look at money's role in gaining and maintaining power (a political issue), evaluate it as a medium of exchange (an economic issue), look at its impact on social classes and the establishment of power relations between the genders and the races, and look at the psychological impact that placing a higher or lower value on money has for the individual. Through discussions and exercises, students come to see the complex interactions among disciplines and how those play out in society.

One exercise seems to work particularly well. The class is divided in half, and each half is given a scenario about a company in financial trouble. One half of the class plays the role of labor; the other half, management. Neither side knows what issues the other will bring to the negotiating table. In the wake of September 11 and the subsequent downturn in the economy, this exercise takes on its own life. I ask them to imagine that they are part of the airline, hotel or restaurant industries. They quickly become impassioned and intense. Then, we come back to the central ideas of individual and community. What communities are they a part of here? What are their responsibilities to each community? How do they resolve the conflicts that are a result of different demands from different communities? They become very engaged in sorting out these issues, and quickly realize that the black and white answers many of them long for do not exist.

For the segment on poverty, I bring in outside speakers. Both speakers so far have been involved with housing—one in Connecticut and one in New York. The New York speaker specializes in housing for the disabled. These two men explain the cultural system of despair that keeps people in poverty generation after generation. They discuss the difficulty of involving those who have given up on their lives in decisions about their children's or their own futures. They make links to political decisions, such as cuts in welfare and access to health care, to education, to daycare, to gender issues, to urbanization, to class. Students begin to see the magnitude of the problem.

We talk about gender. How does one gender interact with the other in school? at home? on the job? And since the possibility that Roe v. Wade could be reversed seems too abstract and distant to them (as most have grown up in a world where abortion has always been legal), I tell them about the job where I was criticized for matching my lipstick and sweater colors. I tell them about the tree service company with offices nationwide that employed one female sales representative, and at which I was told that women couldn't handle the sales position because they couldn't manage the all-male crews. I tell them about the manager who routinely sexually harassed women and was never reported. I tell them about the job where a manager interviewing for secretaries asked candidates (all female, of course) questions about their plans for marriage and children. One of these, I tell them, is the job I currently hold. This, I say, is the 21st century workplace.

These issues are ones they cannot escape. They need money. Frequently, they are in school to guarantee that they can earn lots of it. They cannot escape gender issues. They cannot escape issues of class, race and ethnicity. Then, these issues that affect them are used as springboards for issues that may seem more abstract. To think about the impact of globalization, they watch Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, and review the PBS documentary about Jamaica called *Life and Debt*. We discuss the ways in which globalization relates to gender, race,

privilege and power. We segue into the effects of technology. We ask who has access to technology and whose lives are most improved by it. In conjunction with this, we discuss the ethical decision and the practical decision, and look at various political and economic decisions to discover where we believe they fall on this continuum. These discussions help to make the abstract personal and immediate.

For their final project, students write a paper describing their vision of a Utopia. The assignment requires them to sift through and wrestle with the material of the course, and reach some conclusions for themselves about what's right for their world.

EFFECTS

What are the effects of these courses? In the humanities course, I teach many nurses, criminal justice majors, business majors and future accountants. My course is often the only humanities course they will ever take, and they are often deeply irritated at the perceived distraction from their studies. They are nervous about material that isn't easily quantifiable. But once they see that they have a voice in deciding what's good art and what's not and that they have tools for arguing their position, once they see that creativity is about them, once they see that the arts surround them, then their attitudes begin to shift.

One day a nursing student came to class very excited. She explained that she had created a new bandage on the spot while out on an EMT call, and she saw this as a demonstration of her newfound creativity. Another student rediscovered Latin dancing. A third changed his major and his college in order to study music management. Another painted a tribute to her family in Poland and broke down in tears telling us how difficult it was to be so far from them. These students have all realized that the arts connect them to each other and to the human experience in a direct and powerful way.

The social science students also feel this sense of connection. Through the class discussions, through the creation of their own utopia, and through the exercises and outside speakers, they see the "real" world and its needs. They see themselves as active contributors, even in passivity, to the communities of which they are a part. Some are motivated to volunteer, and some develop a renewed sense of commitment to organizations with which they already work. They have discussions at the dinner table, change a message or two they tell their children, bring me articles, change an attitude.

The final word? These two courses ask students to pay attention, to think, to consider real world consequences. And as students do that, they begin to develop the flexibility to move into the world with the knowledge they have and to use it to become effective members of a society that desperately needs them.

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